

# The Divorce Wars by Anne Crothers, M. Ed

Divorce is a big issue in my practice. I am a therapist with children and teens and many of them are from divorced families. Some are newly divorced; some have been apart for a while. Most are in trouble.

Children are squarely in the middle of divorce. They want to love both parents. They feel tremendous loyalty to both parents. In many cases, the child is blaming themselves for the divorce or actively doing something to fix, control or help their parents. The most common thing that children do is hide their feelings of sadness and grief from their parents. They don't want to burden them and they end up feeling these painful feelings alone. This doesn't work and it doesn't help anyone. These children are overburdened with adult worries and their sadness disrupts their functioning.

All of the parents I see love their children deeply. They all want to be effective and loving parents. The problem is that they are angry and they are guilty. They are angry at their former spouse, so angry that it impairs their ability to co-parent with this person in any effective way. Boundaries about what gets discussed in front of children, about saying negative things about the other parent, boundaries about a lot of things get damaged by their anger. And they don't see it. They often aren't aware of how angry they are and of how far the boundaries have slipped.

Most divorced parents feel guilty. They feel that they have let their children down by not being able to succeed at their marriage. They feel responsible and bad and they let these feelings seep into their parenting. They are often unable to follow through consistently on discipline because of their guilt. They are less effective at setting limits. They tolerate negative behaviors that they shouldn't.

In short, guilt and anger are running the show. A war rages between two enemy camps. Comments are made, little digs about the other. Sometimes children are interrogated about what they did at the other parent's house. Intel is gathered as weaponry against the other side. This info may come up in court; it may come up in an argument. It is ammunition. Tardies to school, food choices, anything is fair game to be critiqued and picked apart by the other.

In the middle, is the child. The child that everyone loves, but are too guilty and too angry to parent effectively. And the child feels torn in two. They now have two homes, neither of which is really what they want. They long for their parents to reunite. They long for their parents to be able to sit in the room together in a civil manner. They are hiding bad feelings and being in-authentic. The joy is gone.

When these families come in for therapy, they are all wounded. A war like this hurts everyone and takes something away from everyone. For the child to heal, the war must end, but both parents are afraid to lay their ammo down. They forget that they loved each other, that they were friends, that they trusted each other. They need help to remember.

The purpose of therapy is to end the war and to establish a functional parenting team. Most of the time, this can be achieved in a satisfactory way pretty quickly. Moving the parents out of denial about their own behaviors and its actual effect on their child helps a lot. Helping children stop hiding feelings and instead sharing them also helps. When parents realize that they are in a team, albeit a dysfunctional one, that helps. If parents can admit that guilty and angry parenting doesn't work, that helps. Getting the family out of denial about boundary violations helps a lot.

Divorce does not have to be a war. Co-parenting with an ex-spouse is tricky, but still possible. Some kids of communication need to be increased, some needs to be decreased. I know one couple that has chosen never to discuss finances but to handle

that through their attorneys because the discussions were poisoning their otherwise functional parenting team. Most couples do respect each other deep down, and respect each other's parenting. They just don't say it, and the other parent doesn't know it. Communication is impossible during a war, but yields gifts when the war ends.

Many people are surprised to hear that I have divorced families come in together. It may seem strange initially, but it's important. They are still a family; they are their child's family. New spouses are not part of the parenting team. They are important, and they are part of the family, but major decisions about parenting must be made by the parenting team.

Children do not make decisions. They should not be asked to choose where they want to live, or how often they want to visit. They have divided loyalties and do not want to be the ones to make the call. Children do need to be advocated for, but they are children. They need the guidance of their parents at all times.

When the war ends, joy returns. Both homes feel lighter and happier. The child is free to love everyone. The pressure to hide feelings or to conceal information is lifted. The parenting team begins to function. Things aren't perfect, but they are perfectly fine. Life can find a new balance for everyone. Peace!

#### Author's Bio:

Anne K. Crothers, M. Ed is a therapist in private practice in Allentown, Pennsylvania. An expert in trauma and abuse, Anne has a special gift with children and teens. She also works with adults and families dealing with divorce, grief and change. In addition, Anne partners with another therapist to do invitational interventions for addiction. Anne contributed to the books, [101 Great Ways to Improve Your Life, Volume 2](#) and [One Page Wisdom](#). For more information about Anne, see her website: [www.healingworksallentown.com](http://www.healingworksallentown.com).